

OPINION COLUMNS

## Opinion: Choose local food to end ‘food apartheid’

We need more local institutions like hospitals or schools to source their food from local producers



Roberto Meza

1:30 AM MST on Nov 26, 2022

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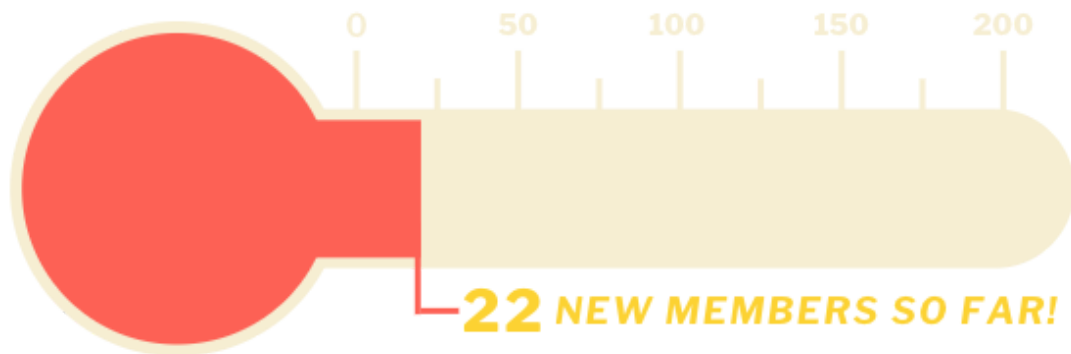
**F**or too many people, especially in low-income areas and many communities of color, healthy food is not always available. Some call these areas “food deserts;” I call this “food apartheid.” These overlooked areas highlight the political and exclusionary policies that perpetuate food insecurity and disenfranchise communities.

However, our collective choices as consumers and as policy influencers can uplift equity in our local food system while championing the viability of local farmers.

As our Colorado history and culture prove, we can’t do it alone. It is through connection to our community, land, economy, culture, environment — and most importantly, to each other — that we can make agriculture accessible to all of us. More than ever, it takes a village.

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We need solutions that are sustainable, affordable, and ensure everyone has the same access to local food – regardless of socio-economics and geography. In addition, I can say firsthand that we need to support our local farmers, so we also can eat and thrive.

This support involves customers choosing our **Colorado Proud** products and our labor of love. It also involves financial commitment from policymakers through beneficial grants like the Local Food Assistance

Program, which will provide financial support to small retailers across Colorado's rural communities who want to sell fresh, local food.

It is through collective relationships and shared ownership that we can restore and regenerate human communities and local food systems. Here's how:

We need more local institutions like hospitals or schools to source their food from local producers.

Hospitals are committed to health and already purchase food for their patients; what if their ingredients came from farms in the communities they serve? This could help circulate more dollars in local economies to support young, beginning, farmers of color and small family farms. Hospitals can also dedicate green space on their campuses for vegetable gardens that provide produce for patients or their community members.

Schools are also important institutions with opportunities to provide food. While some have planted gardens for students to learn more about food and caring for our land, overflow fields on school property, especially in rural Colorado, could also be used by local farmers to co-op acreage to plant for their communities. In addition, schools could invest in cold storage that serves their cafeterias as well as their community.

For hospitals and schools, we can create a hybrid, multi-purpose food system that prioritizes local and regional food while also sourcing from major supply chains. If we shift and focus on addressing land access, dignity and the viability of local farmers to build strong regional food systems – while partnering with institutions, community organizations and retailers whose procurement choices and operations provide a net benefit to people, animals, and planet – we will have farmers who are providing more food hyper-locally, while also creating more space for small farmers to grow on untapped acreage. And that's good news for all of us.

Retailers are dealing with their own supply chain issues, so they might want to consider more local products, especially in low-income areas. Some regional food hubs, like East Denver Food Hub, [Valley Roots Food Hub](#), [Taproot Cooperative](#), [High Plains Food Co-op](#) and [Mountain Roots](#)

**Food Project**, are helping local producers get their products to even the smallest retailers, keeping the footprint as small as possible and helping with access for all. Partnerships and retail collaboration are especially important for connecting fresh food and resources to every location, from food-insecure communities to major institutions.

Consumers are not just people who eat; they are also agents of power. They make a choice every time they purchase food, and choosing local food can make a difference for our farmers, economy, environment, and heritage. As consumers, we need to see ourselves as stewards of life and the land with responsibilities that impact our buying decisions. Look for locally-grown produce that's labeled as Colorado Proud. Visit farmers markets. Use local ingredients. And engage in understanding the current policies that are addressing local agricultural issues.

The heart of the matter is how food can anchor our communities, with help and resources from institutions, retailers and consumers that make up our regional foodshed. The value of connection and relationships in agriculture — whether it's farmer to farmer, consumer to farmer, or community to farmer — helps sustain people, the ag industry, and the Colorado economy.

It is through “village-wide” commitment to these relationships that we can create a shift with food access for our state.

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*KODRITO MEZA, OF BRINGTON, IS CO-FOUNDER OF Emerald Gardens, a year-round greenhouse farm in Bennett and CEO of East Denver Food Hub.*



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